

The shortgrass country, what the Red Men called "By and By," holds up under heat and drouth. Upon return from a trip, the first pass the plane circles before landing, the strength of the tough old clay pack west of Angelo comes to mind.

The glimpse of the two peaks called the Twin Mountains or Lopez Peaks brings back the summer the Big Boss sold Winston Westbrook the six year-old ewes to winter on that tough red clay soil. Every time we went to town that dry winter, we could see those old ewes stretching themselves so far out of shape eating brush and dead weeds through the right of way fence that when they walked they had to curve their necks like ostriches to see.

Relief comes if the plane makes a third pass and I remember Homer Nickel starting the Twin Mountain Post Yards. Mr. Nickel entertained us, besides keeping the herders in cedar posts. Flashes back how the 200 bathtubs he bought when the St. Angelus Hotel closed looked like giant caterpillars in his pasture from the air and sheep grazing from the highway.

In clear weather, the glimpse of the confluence of Spring Creek and the Middle Concho River brings back Cal McGowan and his cowboy Jesus in battle with motorcycle

riders trespassing on the weekend and at war with stray town dog packs every night. The team those two hombres made raised a lamb and wool crop against odds too high for Las Vegas to cover.

On the final, a quick sight over Lake Nasworthy focuses on Dick Nasworthy, the son of the man the lake took from his father's ranch. A big throat catch builds here. Dick rescued the family from a registered horse deal the Big Boss' estate left us on a string of Thoroughbred mares to run on the old ranch; it would have been bad enough to cause a lawsuit.

He charmed those northern folks into taking the mares and colts off grass badly needed for sheep and cows to pay inheritance taxes. His advice to be rid of the stud horse, "Ol' Cold Jaw," left behind at the windup was: "Hell's afire, Monte, you ain't that dumb. They eat stallions in Argentina. Better than mare meat - tastes just like the dark meat of a chicken."

The wheels touching ground sound and feel different, too. Slight tingle moves up the old spinal channel from the hostess' words: "Keep your cell phones and other ..." to "You may now turn on your ..." Brings the reality that the trip ends and work begins right outside that terminal at the pickup parked in the long-term lot.

One big relief at landing comes to being free of the risk of three San Angelo jugkeepers who boarded the plane in Dallas. Charter is too expensive for two people. We had no choice but to take the flight. The slightest bump feels like a spiraling downdraft, bucking fate on an airplane ride with that many bankers on board.

The times should make you sympathize with those guys. Things are so tense in the Wool Capitol that the blood pressure machines in the pharmacies ground out more often than register the reading. Hours after the market closes out at the auction ring, the staccato from boot heels pounding on the catwalks still echoes.

Our routine is the same every time after we land. I go for the pickup; she grabs our bags. I learned way back to sweep the cow feed from the bed before coming to town. One of those San Angelo pigeons filled with cottonseed meal and perched over pickup glass makes a street grackle look like she's been to sidewalk finishing school.

We debate to call tonight or wait until in the morning to check at our outfits and see whether there's been a grass fire, a hail storm, a caved-in well, a lightning strike to the goats on the bed ground, an oil tank explosion, or variations and combinations of these ranch disasters which occur on our respective places.

The difference in time zones makes the decision to call the next morning easier. Whatever direction or continent I last slept fails to correlate with ranch hours. Never once have I returned from a trip that I didn't arise three hours too early or oversleep that amount.

Some shortgrassers had jet lag before the city folks discovered the ailment. We knew a long time ago that standing on a 30-foot high windmill table or just lying on your back staring at the clouds floating over as a teenager made you feel funny the next day.

People may have forgotten where Cal and Jesus pastured sheep on the rivers. Bet the town dogs remembered long enough to pass the warning on to the pups. For the bathtubs Homer Nickel bought, a check with his son started a new story and ignored the fate of the tubs.